
Book Review

They all want to write

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The book is rather old, first time written in 1939, and subsequently revised in two later editions, the 3rd came in 1964, which I am reviewing. It is about the experiences of 4 teachers (three being the authors of the book, the fourth having passed on) in their school, about experimenting with processes that could help children write with freedom, originality and skill. I found the book delightful and very insightful. It narrates actual experiences with 100 early learners, documenting their evolution for roughly 4 years, from hesitant, unskilled writing to becoming confident, self-driven authors, slowly gaining a sense of personal mastery over creation of written texts. The strength of the book lies in the fact that it analyses these processes in great detail and gathers insights, evolving and suggesting pedagogic practices for other teachers which would have relevance for all early writers. The authors have also tried to gather further insights and refined their ideas over a subsequent period of 25 years, and have tried incorporating these in the later editions.

The book gives a large number of delightful examples of these writings of various children, along with the circumstances interacting with personalities, amidst which those texts emerged. Many examples are given as actual photo-pictures of what the child wrote, enabling the reader to see how powerful the child's urge to write was, and how s/he had to struggle with the mechanics of writing, labouring with spelling, arrangement or spacing, with frequent cutting. Some of these writings display a high quality of expression and narration. The book separately gives accounts of the first hesitant beginnings of writings, going further to detailing of phases when the initial inhibitions were won over, and children got into more demanding work. It also details case studies of 10 children with varying writing skills, styles and their individuality reflecting into their writings evolving over the years.

Before starting this experiment, the authors in their prior experiences as language teachers had found children's productions in the name of

creative writing as 'stilted and meagre' products, not worthy of the name 'creative', and found that children wrote because they had to. Thus, started this prolonged experiment, which was primarily guided by the principle of human beings' genuine *need* to express and communicate, that shapes itself in writing.

The authors differentiate between two seemingly antagonistic kinds of writing, 'utilitarian and artistic', which seem to serve different needs of the individual and make different demands on the author, and hence necessitate differing opportunities for writing and training for enhancement. The authors think that 'the complete freedom necessary for the life of creative spirit has always stood opposed to the methodological acquisition of skills and techniques'. Yet, through their experiments think that 'a more constructive synthesis could be made of these apparently disparate elements', if an attempt is made to 'zealously guard... the reality of the one and the freedom of the other'. The authors have made, in their pedagogy, a clear demarcation between these two kinds of writing: 'practical' and 'personal'. Practical writing has been defined as the writing linked to daily life, arising from genuine utilitarian need of communication between people, consisting of letters, reports, notices, posters, records and expository writing. Personal writing consists of free expression that may take the form of stories, poetry, emotional outlets or fiction of any kind. The two were encouraged very differently, utilising their different philosophical origins,

with separate pedagogical principles and techniques. Personal writing was encouraged as a free, unchecked, unbound enterprise for the sheer joy of doing it, whereas, practical writing was assisted with ample training.

The authors think that any elementary school curriculum that pre-determines units of study cannot capture or engage the spontaneity of the child's mind at any given time and interest. Personal writing, which is spontaneous capturing of thoughts and feelings, using 'words to paint pictures or to catch a special thought or mood' caters to the need for free expression for the individual, where 'the source lies wholly within the individual and where there is no final authority other than personal taste' or any 'shaping to fit external standards'. To be kept as a 'joyous and genuine outlet, it cannot be straitjacketed in subject and form'.

Thus, personal writing was initiated in a very natural fashion, through building a good literary atmosphere, by friendly, unhurried sharing of good literature with children, where everyone collectively chuckled, laughed, or shivered to enjoy these sessions. In this groundwork, the habit of appreciative listening was consciously established. Stories written by other children were deliberately read out to make children want to write their own. Care was also taken to read some stories in which adult frailties or children's cleverness were demonstrated, to dissolve resistance or the 'fear of adults' displeasure'. Besides, positive remarks by listeners were encouraged, while negative criticism consciously checked, underscoring how fault-

finding interferes with the enjoyment of the activity. Such sessions were continued till children were in the mind-set of kindly acceptance of most offerings without condemnation, and started showing signs to want to start telling their own stories, which often followed a casual suggestion by the teacher. Story-telling began with a few children with appreciative listening by others. Soon others were also encouraged to make their own stories. Drama or play-acting of some stories in the group added to this interest. If children wanting to make stories could not come up with ideas, teachers would suggest use of any existing characters in old stories. It was discovered children found it easy and fun to start with familiar, well-loved characters, e.g. a family with 5 baby-bears, which was built upon by almost every child. The transition from making stories orally to writing was only possible through a long phase where the children dictated their creations to the teacher.

After considerable enjoyment of story-creation, listening and dictation, some children showed a willingness to write their own stories. Free time was provided in which those who were willing could start writing, while others could do any work of their liking like reading, drawing etc. No force or compulsion was there to write, no asking for the finished product unless children brought it to show by themselves, neither stigma for not writing/finishing, while willingness to write was encouraged. They often had trouble writing words, and so the words they asked for were written on the chalkboard.

To save these attempts at free-expression from any burdensome effort, these writing sessions were carefully freed from any checking, correction, comment on technique, spelling, penmanship or appearance, since the labour of putting down on paper itself was often tiring for children. Children wrote about themselves, about their own experiences, or characters they subconsciously related to, mostly their intuitive world where 'the familiar and the wished-for were happily mixed'. In fact, teachers found that 'ordinary characters rarely touch the well springs of imagination, but fall instead into dull, conventional moulds. It is the half-fanciful characters that set invention working....'

The teachers took great care to graciously accept with sincere appreciation whatever children wrote, even when they found some entries too meagre and strongly resisted any urge or impatience to suggest improvements. They found once the children were freed from adult coercion, correction or 'arbitrary direction' towards adult standards, and were well assured that anything they wrote would be acceptable, they simply wrote to please themselves or to entertain their peers. At times, stories verged on impertinence, a 'mild outburst against adults', but no adverse reaction to such things was shown by teachers. The presentation of stories in front of the class was assisted by teachers, through consciously bringing in dramatic presentation, which helped in highlighting the drama and emotions in a story, and thus holding

the audience's interest. As children grew up, they eventually took over the presentation of their own stories.

These teachers were also careful about what to appreciate, because they wanted to build in the child's consciousness a sense of good writing. This would require children as authors earning spontaneous appreciation and delight from their audience, the other children. Teachers did not comment on everything, and even when they did comment, it was done unobtrusively, in sharing sessions with the whole class. The method was to appreciate those elements that would build toward further writing, like an original idea, a fresh invention/observation, or the vivid, individual expression and honest individual flavour. However, teachers note, 'because each story is woven out of his (the child's) own being, the glow of success is a peculiarly personal and vitalising one...the child unconsciously identifies himself with the protagonist of his tale and accepts as his own, the praise and approval accorded to his hero....for a brief time he is not a child, subject to the limits set by adults, but a being with omnipotent power who moves characters about as he wills'....Thus, his stories awaken in him a 'sense of innate power', of being a 'clever and capable person' in front of his peers.

However, it was also realised that praise or blame could equally work as deterrents to free writing. While criticism could easily shatter confidence, praise could bring in self-consciousness, bringing in stress for the child that

she may not be able to equal her own performance again. Hence instead of evaluation, attention was always on how the story affected the audience. The real concern for the teachers was not so much in the 'specific product as in the sincerity and on-goingness of the writing processes. Rarely were stories gathered for publication or selections for permanent recording, since this immediately lead to self-consciousness, comparison, 'model-building' and also stagnation. All writing was for 'release, satisfaction, and the power it affords', rather than 'commendation'. Story-writing was like play, with a spirit of adventure and fun, to be done with the whole heart. One poignant question that troubled these teachers in initial years of experimentation was whether writing for sheer joy would show improvement in skill over the years. They found overwhelming evidence for this happening, as these children, with their evolution, surpassed any other groups the teachers had ever encountered.

Poetry writing by children was stimulated by first making them 'paint a picture in words' inspired by their own inner imagery after some event that affected or fascinated them deeply, e.g. a storm. Another way to inspire them was by reading out poems written by other children and even adults, pointing to parts that 'sounded different' or were 'a new way of talking'. But care was taken not to make these sessions too prolonged or overwhelming, so as to not make children start imitating or losing faith

in their own words or ideas. Teachers also normally chose free verse rather than rhymes or strongly patterned poetry, because they felt 'a child's ear often is so captured by the rhyming that he misses the meaning and the individual essence'. In poetry writing sessions, an appropriate mood was built by reading out poetry, getting children into a quiet, dreamy state, working or thinking alone. Once children begin to start thinking of poetry the teacher would act as a scribe to take dictations, because often the rush of thoughts was too fast and complex for an early writer to put down in writing. These poems were read out to the whole class, directing attention at parts that bring out individual flavour, or were vivid and fresh. Nothing was belittled or given suggestions for changes or improvements. The author-teachers feel 'it is just as dishonest for an adult to change a child's utterances as it is for a child to copy the work of another and call it his own.' In later grades, as children gained mastery over the mechanics of writing, they started putting their poems on paper by themselves.

Directly in contrast to personal writing, it was found important to adopt a totally different pedagogy for practical writing. Whereas no need was felt to tamper with personal writing, with practical writing, a direct and thorough teaching was considered essential. Writing, however, was seen as a part of the continuum of seeing, talking, drawing, painting, listening, planning and reading. An insight given

by authors here is: 'in the primary grades, abundant experience in oral expression is more important in the development of ability to write than the actual writing itself'.

Practical writing was driven purely by purpose, and the children from the very outset were clear as to why a certain text needed to be written. E.g. for the first graders the purpose of writing emerged from planning a picnic which excited every single child. Writing in this case was necessitated by sending requests to parents, for making lists of purchases and costing, all of which was done by children collectively, assisted by teachers or senior students. Every child saw the need for neatly writing text that had a real purpose, once the text was discussed and written on the board. After greater practice, children started making their own messages, letters or notes, which were dictated to teachers in the early phases. Even when the teachers acted as scribes for the child-composer, the child added her personal touch to this note by putting in details like date, name, the greeting or drawings of her choice. The teachers encouraged children to give an individual, personal touch to all such writing, by asking for 'something in your letter that is just like you'. Often the teachers had to work on the first draft of letters individually with each child. For certain tasks, children were given opportunity to experiment on rough paper, so that they could produce something for personal satisfaction or pride, for 'the vitalising pleasure of working, not

for the teacher's approval, but for his own'. Children made things like titles, folders for personal work, posters, and advertisements for upcoming events, plans and records. The authors think 'when children care about what they are doing, they work far harder than any teacher would have the heart to expect'. But they also warn that things like letters and notes, even though provide valuable opportunities for writing, if done too much can lead to 'distaste of the activity itself'.

The more challenging arena of report writing in later grades necessitated much more experience of the subject matter, ability to organise and present ideas in sub-themes, as well as the skill of writing itself. Teachers wanted to save children from copying, or 'mere verbalism'. For this, it was important for children to acquire adequate first-hand familiarity with the subject beforehand, to digest it thoroughly, so that it could be presented as their own words. The process started with finding out enough about a subject from surroundings, real life, discussions, books and so on, and then reporting it orally. Sufficient help was given by teachers to enable a child to break up a topic, look up references, and to organise the material gathered. Often the child read out her material to the teacher and discovered that it seemed unpolished before presenting it to the class. A real challenge here was to save children from sheer fatigue, and it was found wise to make use of conversation as an economical step towards refining expression, by verbally sorting of

ideas and discussion beforehand. Writing periods were kept deliberately short, and one topic given sufficient days to avoid daily fatigue. Many times children worked in groups over different aspects of the same subject. Most of the practical writing was read out to the class, made a part of a book, a larger discussion, or served some such 'real purpose' of finding out facts. The real test of clarity came from feedback from the rest of the class, and for the child author, this test was 'almost as tangible as seeing that a handmade boat really sails'. The teachers feel that 'a sportsman like attitude of seeing how suggested improvements would make the thought clearer in practical writing can be acquired by almost every child'.

This book gives a rich insight to the reader into a real journey of experiences with children. If some weakness can be pointed out, it is that the reader gets no idea about the social, cultural, class, gender or linguistic differences amongst children that were part of this experiment, and the experimenting teachers do not take note of such complexities. One does not know if there were children who faced difficulties because of being first generation learners, having no familiarity with written text or its purposes when they entered school, or had a different first language other than English; all of which may have led to difficulties of comprehension of classroom discourse or the written symbol system. The impression created by the book is that of mainstream middle-class children interacting with

teachers from the same class. It is possible that such discussions are not part of the book because they were not so much part of the education discourse in the 30's when the book was first written. However, even when such perspectives of differing social/cultural location of children started emerging in subsequent decades, they have not come to be mentioned in the book in the later editions. Yet, I feel, this experiment has relevance even today, giving valuable insights into the process of children becoming independent and free authors. One important reason why I think so is that the method of these teachers is based on equal respect for the individuality of each child, giving sufficient freedom and respect and there is no element of coercion or comparison between children. I think that even children with initial socio-cultural differences would be able to benefit from such an enabling environment. The fact that the teachers gave great importance to listening, talking and dictating by the child, and use of the child's own words, would make a child with linguistic differences also to grow in such a system. Such a method would be valuable for teachers in an Indian classroom as well, where multilingualism and social differences are very real, as long as teachers imbibe the spirit of this experiment, that of giving space to all words and worldviews that children bring with them to class.

If one were to view the method of these four teachers in the light of organic writing encouraged by Sylvia Ashton

Warner, in her experiment with Maori children (Ashton Warner, S., 1963), I feel, the method used by the authors of this book is also organic. Writing is not isolated or separated from the whole range of ideas, thoughts, feelings, expression, talking and genuine need for communication, but is developed as a part of life lived by children with their peers or homes, growing out of their own meanings and views of the world. Instead of children choosing significant words for writing or key vocabulary, as in Warner's class, here children choose ideas, thoughts and feelings to express themselves. The words they choose in this expression are also their own. One major strength of this method is that genuine motivation and skill in creation is built first before any writing is attempted. The process of verbal creation is initiated much before written creation through considerable environment building, inspiration and encouragement. Children create many short or long texts of their choice verbally before they attempt to write, and gain considerable mastery, joy and pride in this process of creation through speech first. Since writing is laborious and their initial attempts at writing by themselves would be brief and meagre, with writing unable to keep pace with their mental ideas, they are given considerable assistance by teachers through dictation for a long time, to save them from fatigue, boredom or drudgery. Also techniques and norms of practical writing are consciously built through patient assistance, but even this is done without pressure or coercion, with the help of genuine motivation and

need. The only standards of expertise to be aimed for all kinds of writing are understanding, approval and appreciation of the child's peers, thus building in the child a sense of an organic whole of writer-storyteller-audience, of

which the writer aspires to be a part. In totality, it seems, and as is claimed by the authors of the book, the method helps to turn children both into artists and artisans, of both the art as well as the craft of writing.

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